

## Education, What For?

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To the unwary, the question "Education, what for?" may suggest that we are free to choose educational aims according to whim. Nothing could be further from the truth. The very nature of the universe sets some limits. These, likely enough, we all accept; as a wag once observed, we'd better! The nature of human nature sets other limits, and these we sometimes disregard at our peril. The minimum conditions that will preserve a society-any society-set still further limits. And we have to recognize the limits set by the nature of a particular child who is fitting himself to live in a particular society. If these limitations seem obvious, let us recall that it is only a few years since G. Brock Chisholm published "Can Man Survive?" In this article he proposed in essence that, since all mental ills stem from the moral certitudes inculcated in youth, we should cease teaching children about "values" (1). Apart from the probable impossibility of so teaching children at all, for want of possible teachers or methods, the upshot of following Dr. Chisholm's proposal would surely be no society (since society rests upon shared values) and hence, shortly, no children-or, at least, no human children. Dr. Chisholm's point may have been well taken psychologically, but more conditions than the psychological must be satisfied by an educational system, including some necessity to preserve the society that supports the educational system and nurtures, while it limits, the child.

The minimum condition for survival as an independent human being is coherence. The child moves-as he grows up or if he grows up-from the chaos of infancy, through the clamor of childhood and the confusion of adolescence, to the relative coherence of adult life. The fact that even adult coherence is partial and precarious does not detract from the point. Indeed, this melancholy recognition reinforces the point by informing us of what we already know: that few adults have been allowed to any sensible degree to grow up.

It is the business of education in the largest sense-all the child's learning experience-to achieve in him and help him achieve that coherence. It is the business of education in

the narrower sense-the task of the school-to share that labor of love and life and learning appropriately with other social institutions, particularly the home, and with the child's own peer group.

But before the school can share in the task at all, there must be an understanding of what coherence involves. In its barest sense it means a belonging together in the same sense that the elements of a good picture or the notes of a satisfying chord or the themes of a great symphony belong together. A child, however, must cohere on many more levels than a picture. He has a body and a physical inheritance and a physical organization; he has a mind and an intellectual organization; he has feelings and an emotional organization; and, at any one moment, he has a set of attitudes or preferences and a moral organization. If he is coherent, if he is one and whole, his coherence is manifest, not only at each "level," but between levels, so that feeling informs thought and thought reforms feeling and neither outruns nor lags far behind physical capacity and skill. Moreover, since he has memory and foresight (which enable him to transcend time and contemplate the future-making tomorrow, by that act, different from what it otherwise would have been) his self of today must be in organic relation to the self of yesterday and to the likely self, or one of the likely selves, of tomorrow.

Since every child is in some sense unique and since that uniqueness is the very principle of his unity and the very ground of his value, the notion of educating for coherence implies "recognizing individual differences," a phrase that puts the matter most ineptly. It is not difference, as such, that we should be interested in: it is uniqueness. When we express the matter in terms of "recognizing individual differences," we tend to be led off toward mass psychological testing of children, "typing" each one by a number (an intelligence quotient or sociometric score or what not) until finally he becomes virtually a statistic in a complex calculation of "how to manage a classroom." We have thus come, by way of individual differences, to depersonalization and mass management. A school organized on such principles may be a "reflection," but it is also, we hope, a caricature of the workaday world outside.

What is involved in approaching a child as a unique being is very difficult to put clearly. We have difficulty not because, in the ordinary sense, we do not know what we are talking about, but rather because, for many important things, our capacity to define analytically is often in inverse ratio to our genuine experience of them. Where we cannot define, however, we may help by pointing to what we have in mind.

Anyone who has profoundly loved or been loved will be aware of the direction in which the argument so far points. That in the beloved which evokes love is neither the

undifferentiated clutter of behaviors and characteristics (which, in one sense, is "what she is") nor some teased-out set of "individual differences" (red hair, blue eyes, dimple, cute pout) that one could put on a list in a guidance department's file folder. What love homes in upon, without analysis and weighing, is the perceived or sensed or felt principle of coherence or pattern, the unifying principle that, for each person separately, makes him, in the most important sense, distinctively what he is. It is this ordering principle that constitutes his uniqueness; it is this that is the source of his value; and it is this that calls for, and calls out, "understanding" and appreciation-as against, say, knowledge about, or analysis of, the child's characteristics or differences. One might safely say that springs up only where such understanding furnishes the soil; that love is the seedbed for learning or any other creative activity. Good learning thus turns upon good teaching; good teaching, upon love; love, upon understanding; and understanding, on a set in the teacher toward discovering in and with the child his uniqueness, the basis of his unity or the pattern of his coherence-indeed, his inmost self.

So much for the matter from the child's side: his coherence as a unique human being should be the end or aim of his education. Indeed, the induction into coherence is his education, the only question being whether his schooling gives him one or not. If it does, he may "find himself" with the aid of the school; if not, the school may have served only to divert him from what, successful or not, must be his life's quest.

Just as there is a minimum condition for the survival of the person as a person, so there is a minimum condition for the survival of a society as a society. That condition is cohesion, also a principle of belonging together, but now as between people rather than within one person. It is just as easy-and twice as dangerous-to interpret the principle of needed social cohesion mechanically, so that it is held to mean that, to achieve "social solidarity," everyone must be taught or brought to think alike to a degree of particularity that would require a propaganda mill instead of a school to achieve and a totalitarian dictatorship to sustain.

But in our eagerness to throw out the totalitarian bath, there is every danger that we also toss out the democratic baby or, at least, the conditions for its survival, if one may mix a metaphor. It is necessary to the very notion of democracy, strange as it may sound, that everybody (or nearly everybody) think alike-in a limited number of vital respects. The emphasis must fall with about equal weight on two words: *limited* and *vital*. As we move away from the demand or expectation that persons must agree in only a limited number of ways, we move toward a blatant dictatorship of power or toward a more subtle dictatorship of a conformist mass society. As we move away from vital-we could say vigorous, committed, dedicated-support for these few overarching universal

agreements, democracy ceases to survive because its undoubted strains are not compensated by perceived and deeply felt rewards.

It is only when we take these views of the child and society together that the seeming conflict between the principles of coherence and cohesion, between the interests of person and group, of the one and the many, can be at all resolved. For it is only this kind of society that can give a place to the principle of coherence; and it is only on the basis of coherence that the kind of society that permits and encourages it-that requires limited but devoted agreement-can be duly appreciated.

If whatever we mean by that overworked word democracy has itself a unique and distinctive value as against other ways of life-and many of us passionately believe it has-that value lies precisely in this: What is to be valued in democracy is not a set of practices or forms- campaigns, ballots, parliaments, committees, debates-but its spirit. The spirit of democracy is manifest, from the side of the person, in its capacity to sustain, nurture, and value (not tolerate!) him in all his particularity. The genius of democracy, from the outsider's, or public, viewpoint lies in its capacity to prosper, the more its citizens are individualized, differentiated, and encouraged in the development and free expression of that which makes each a person, unique, irreplaceable, something quite other than an entry in somebody's "table of organization" or an item on someone's "list of personnel."

This is not the place to describe in great detail the nature of the limited agreement underlying a "democratic" society. Obviously, however, the consensus has to do with "the rules of the game" rather than with any particular outcome-indeed, more exactly, with the rules by which the rules of the game may be changed in such ways that the vitality of the game itself is preserved. Older children understand the idea and embody it readily in their play; only adult political philosophers have difficulty with the thought. What makes it elusive-as elusive as the principle of coherence-is that democracy is so much more a matter of the spirit in which something is done than of the legalities by which it is explained that it is difficult to capture in words what most people, children included, can recognize when they see it.

If this view of education is accepted, we are led, I think, to a process as unlike the whim-ridden schooling of the twenties and thirties as anything can be. As any experienced teacher knows, the minute a child discovers (and the majority, it must be admitted, never do discover) that his education is a search or quest for himself and therefore for the limits of himself-in that moment an enterprise that was all sicklied o'er with the cast of unreality suddenly becomes vital, alive, "challenging," worthy of

commitment. Suddenly we have a "student" and prospective colleague instead of a "pupil" and prospective sheep.

This set toward self-discovery also determines what is relevant and important, and justifies-if, and only if, it is genuine-the act of faith required of the young child, the beginning student, to make him study earnestly what at first must seem remote from his concerns but will finally be central. The value-orientation involved furnishes the only ground on which one may legitimately distinguish between "frills" and "fundamentals." The fundamentals are those activities and experiences that for this child-and for that one and that one-will most fully enable him to come into possession of himself as a member also of a society that will seek little more from him, except that he further the same quest in others. And education-as against, say, recreation-is the earnest pursuit of those fundamentals.

It hardly needs saying, perhaps, to so sophisticated a readership, that such views are neither an ideology to be thought about nor a sermon to be preached to the children (or the school staff) but a way of life to be embodied and exemplified in the school. Such orientations-to self and others-are caught, not taught, and they cannot be caught except from those themselves so infected.

Here not all rests on the school, for the child learns a great deal more than he learns in school and, for better or for worse, a great that is different from what he learns in school. The school only damages itself by overestimating (or underestimating) its own importance vis-a-vis the home, by making itself a cultural factotum, or confusing its role with that of other institutions.

If the school does its share of the educational task, that should be sufficient and challenge enough for any institution! That share cannot be distinguished in a book or a short paper, let alone a sentence. But we shall be pointing in the right direction if we say that the school is most notably the custodian of the reality-system-as against, say, the wish-system-the mediator to the child of those realities and that realism that may in due time enable him to become what he and we now dream of his becoming.

This, I think, is our task.

## NOTES

1. G. Brock Chisholm, "[Can Man Survive?](#)" ETC., IV (Winter, 1947), 106- 11. For a rejoinder, see John R. Seeley, "Can Man-in-Society Survive?" ETC., V (Autumn, 1948)